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## Teachers union called 'terrorist' Education secretary accuses the NEA

[Robert Pear, New York Times](#)

Tuesday, February 24, 2004

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**Washington** -- Education Secretary Rod Paige said the National Education Association, one of the nation's largest labor unions, was like "a terrorist organization" because of the way it was resisting many provisions of a school-improvement law pushed through Congress by President Bush.

Paige made the comments Monday in a private meeting with governors at the White House just hours before the president stepped up the tempo of his re-election campaign with a speech assailing his Democratic opponents.

Paige later apologized for a poor choice of words but repeated his criticism of the teachers union as a group of obstructionists.

His comments were described by four governors and confirmed by the Education Department.

"The secretary was responding to a question," said Susan Aspey, a spokeswoman for Paige. "He said he considered the NEA to be a terrorist organization."

The Education Department is working to enforce the No Child Left Behind Act, the biggest change in federal education policy in a generation. Paige has made no attempt to hide his frustration with the NEA, which has said it plans to sue the Bush administration over lack of funding for demands in the 2001 law.

The governors who recounted Paige's remarks were two Democrats, Jennifer M. Granholm of Michigan and James E. Doyle of Wisconsin, and two Republicans, Mike Huckabee of Arkansas and Linda Lingle of Hawaii.

Doyle quoted Paige as saying, "The NEA is a terrorist organization."

Granholm said the governors were "all a little bit stunned" to hear the association described in such terms.

Huckabee said Paige "was trying to point out that one reason it's been so difficult to execute real reform is that a lot of people in teachers unions are trying to protect the status quo."

The NEA, founded in 1857, has 2.7 million members. It spends roughly \$1 million a year lobbying in Washington. It is also a big political donor, mostly to Democrats.

In the last presidential election cycle, 1999-2000, NEA and its political action committee donated \$3.1 million to federal candidates and national party committees, and about \$9 of every \$10 went to Democrats.

"He's frustrated by its lack of support for a law that's clearly aimed at helping all children," Lingle said of Paige's remarks. In addition, she said, Paige complained that the association seemed more concerned about its members than about children.

In an interview, Reg Weaver, president of the NEA, said: "Secretary Paige's comments were pathetic and morally repugnant. They are no laughing matter. When our members learn of his comments, they will be outraged and even more determined to make changes in the law."

The No Child Left Behind Act calls for greater use of standardized tests and remedial action to raise student achievement and improve school performance. Some governors, while endorsing the goal, say the law did not provide enough money for states to upgrade school programs. The education association is lobbying for legislation that would give states more flexibility and more money.

Paige, who was born in Mississippi and served as superintendent of schools in Houston from 1994 to 2000, said he had gone too far in describing the union as a terrorist organization.

"It was an inappropriate choice of words to describe the obstructionist scare tactics that the NEA's Washington lobbyists have employed against No Child Left Behind's historic education reforms," Paige said. "As one who grew up on the receiving end of insensitive remarks, I should have chosen my words better."

Paige suggested that the union's lobbyists were out of step with its members. "Our nation's teachers, who have dedicated their lives to service in the classroom, are the real soldiers of democracy," Paige said. By contrast, he asserted, "the NEA's high-priced Washington lobbyists have made no secret that they will fight against bringing real, rock-solid improvements in the way we educate all our children, regardless of skin color, accent or where they live."

Weaver insisted: "We are the teachers. There is no distinction."

Terry McAuliffe, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said, "Secretary Paige and the Bush administration have resorted to the most vile and disgusting form of hate speech, comparing those who teach America's children to terrorists."

John J. Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, said, "The Bush administration would like to label all those who disagree with it as terrorists in order to cover up its policies, which are harmful to working families, and to divert attention from its inability to create good jobs."

Education is likely to be a major issue in this year's elections. "I'm going to vigorously defend No Child Left Behind because I know in my heart of hearts it's the absolute right role for the federal government -- to provide money, but insist upon results," Bush said Monday. He described the law as "one of the most constructive reforms in education policy" ever made by the federal government.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota, a Republican, said he shared the president's view. "The cry cannot be solely, 'Send us more money,' " Pawlenty said. "That is one measure, but it cannot be the only measure."

The governors were in Washington for four days of discussions at the annual meeting of the National Governors Association.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

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